C.O.G. History

Michael Thorn

The Covenant of the Goddess is one of the largest and oldest Wiccan religious organizations with members in North America, Europe and Australia. Wicca, or Witchcraft is the most popular expression of the religious movement known as Neo-Paganism, which, according to the Institute for the Study of American Religion, is the fastest growing religion in the United States. It practitioners are reviving ancient Pagan practices and beliefs of pre-Christian Europe and adapting them to contemporary life. The result is a religion that is both old and new, both traditional and creative.

Witchcraft is a life-affirming, earth- and nature-oriented religion which sees all of life as sacred and interconnected, honors the natural world as the embodiment of divinity, immanent as well as transcendent, and experiences the divine as feminine and often as masculine, as well. Like the spiritual world view and practices of Native Americans and Taoists, Wiccan spiritual practices are intended to attune humanity to the natural rhythms and cycles of the universe as a means of personally experiencing divinity. Rituals, therefore, coincide with the phases of the moon, the change of the seasons, solstices and equinoxes and days which fall in between these such as May Day and Halloween. This calendar of celebrations is referred to as the Wheel of the Year. Most Witches consider their practice a priest/esshood, akin to the mystery schools of classical Greece and Rome, involving years of training and passage through life-transforming initiatory rituals.

All Witches agree on an ethical code known as the Wiccan Rede, "An it harm none, do what ye will," which honors the freedom of each individual to do what she or he believes is right, but also recognizes the profound responsibility that none may be harmed by one's actions.

In the 1970's there was a marked rise of interest in Witchcraft not only in the United States, but throughout the world, reflecting a growing feminist awareness and global concern for the environment. In the Spring of 1975, a number of Wiccan elders from diverse traditions, all sharing the idea of forming a religious organization for all practitioners of Witchcraft, gathered to draft a "covenant" among themselves. These representatives also drafted bylaws to administer this new organization now known as the Covenant of the Goddess. At the 1975 Summer Solstice, the bylaws were ratified by thirteen member congregations (or covens). The Covenant of the Goddess was incorporated as a nonprofit religious organization on October 31st, 1975.

The Covenant is an umbrella organization of cooperating autonomous Witchcraft congregations with the power to confer credentials on its qualified clergy. It fosters cooperation and mutual support among Witches and secures for them the legal protections enjoyed by members of other religions. The Covenant is non-hierarchical and governed by consensus. Two-thirds of its clergy are women.

The Covenant is coordinated by a national board of directors. Many of its activities are conducted at the regional level by local councils. The Covenant holds an annual national conference open to the Wiccan community, as well as regional conferences, and publishes a newsletter. In recent years, the Covenant has taken part in spiritual and educational conferences, interfaith outreach, large public rituals, environmental activism, community projects and social action, as well as efforts to correct negative stereotypes and promote accurate media portrayals. Its clergy perform legal marriages (handfastings), preside at funerals and other rituals of life-transition, and provide counseling to Witches including those in the military and in prisons.

The Covenant also provides for the need of it members and their families with disaster relief, health insurance, Scouting awards, sponsorship of college and university student groups, and legal assistance in instances of discrimination. The Covenant's participation in the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions continues its efforts to restore the respect due to a legitimate and deeply-rooted religion, protect and preserve the earth through its public dissemination of its wisdom and traditions, and participate in dialogue as a contributing member of the world's community of faiths.

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